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ABSTRACT

Although many educators believe that children are under stress, formally testing children for stress and coping is very difficult. This study compiled and analyzed the significant mean differences of the frequency of identified stressors and coping strategy responses between school groups to identify stressors and coping strategies as perceived by school children. Primary (N=94) and middle (N=207) school students who attended a laboratory school at a state university in eastern Kentucky responded to the questions "When you are at school, what worries or upsets you?" and "When these things worry you, how do you make yourself feel better?" Data were classified and eight stressor types and eight coping strategy types were identified. Statistically significant differences were found between primary grade students and middle school students in 8 of the 16 response areas. From primary to middle school grades, there was a significant increase in the mean frequencies of two stress types (school work and achievement, peer relationships); a significant decrease in the mean frequencies of three stress types (physical injury/loss; loss of personal space, comfort and time; and discipline); and statistically significant differences in three types of coping strategies, with middle school students using more distraction and catharsis and primary school students using direct action. The high frequency levels of stress expressed by subjects have implications for school guidance programs. (NB)

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Children's Identification of Stress Related
Factors and Coping Strategies

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Children's Identification of Stress Related Factors and Coping Strategies

Because of our hurried society and lack of family support, educators believe that the children of today are under more stress than ever. Greater and earlier competition has placed pressure on them to succeed at school and our changing family life styles offer less emotional support in the home. The concern about children under stress is well founded as it not only disrupts the academic functioning of children but it can eventually create mental or physical trauma.

Stress

Stress is defined many different ways. The Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 1985 p.1166) lists five definitions of stress, one of which defines it as "a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation." Antoinette Saunders, a specialist in stress education for children, has explained what is meant by stress as an extra demand made on our bodies which may be negative or positive in nature. She further explained that this demand causes a physiological reaction which prepares the body for a survival type of response. (Reed, 1984)

Because stress produces such energy, it is a subject worthy of study. If one wishes to investigate stress in children, one must first identify it. Again, this can become a dilemma as stress is a very personal thing. One event may cause a positive effect on a person yet completely devastate another. Factors such as age, gender, genetics, temperament, intelligence, and social or environmental circumstances affect the type and intensity of response a person gives to a stressful situation. (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983)

When one studies stress in children, one must consider the factor of age. Children will be concerned about different types of stressors than adults or even other children of a different age. Unfortunately, analytic research in the comparison of types of stressors in children is relatively new, therefore, many and varied opinions exist about which stressors most negatively affect which age child. The following table (Table 1) presents an outline of sources of childhood stressors as reported by several professionals.

(insert Table 1 here)

Coping Strategies

The study of childhood coping strategies has the same dilemma as the study of childhood stress.

Identification, explanation, and training is based on adult understanding of coping. In addition, most of the literature on childhood stress focuses only on the physiological or physical responses of stress. For the purposes of this study, coping is referred to as the "cognitive or behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction" (Folkman, 1984, p. 843).

In Honig's (1986, Part 1) review of the literature concerning stress and coping in children it was found that stress response follows several stages. The stages are: alarm, appraisal, search for a coping strategy, and finally implementation of coping responses. It is after the child perceives a stressor and then appraises it that a coping response will be sought.

There is currently no widely accepted instrument which measures the coping strategies of adults or children. As Table 2 illustrates, a variety of categorizations have been generated for the purpose of investigating coping strategies, particularly in adults. Most questionnaires used to identify coping strategies of adults are open ended formats. Such a procedure is also warranted in the study of coping

strategies in children to determine their perception of personal attempts to manage stress.

(insert Table 2 here)

Measuring Childhood Stress and Coping Strategies

After the review of literature of childhood stress and coping strategies it is apparent that much of what is known in these two areas is based upon adult perceptions. It is extremely difficult to formally test children for stress and coping because most surveys require reading ability or the adult is required to analyze the child's life and infer conclusions. Both methods leave much to be desired as personal contact with the child is needed to be able to receive a primary source of information. In the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, modified for children (Holmes & Rahe, 1986) children must be old enough to read well and the intensity ratings are pre-established based on an adult version of this scale. Therefore, the very young child could not be surveyed as he/she must have reading ability and interpretations are based upon adult perceptions of intensity. In Yamamoto's (1979) investigation of children's assessment of life experiences in terms of stress, results indicated that there were often differences in the children's assessment of stress than

that of adult professionals. Therefore, it is difficult to analyze children's perceptions of stressors and coping strategies as compared to adults.

The difficulty in assessing children and the possibility of contrary perceptions between children and adults lead to a major question: How do children perceive stress and coping? This question plus the element of the necessity for educators to identify stressors and coping strategies in a school setting call for more study in these areas. A better understanding about the ways in which a child perceives situations while in an academic setting helps educators work more effectively with children's problems.

The following investigation was developed to identify stressors and coping strategies as perceived by school children. The study compiled and then analyzed the significant mean differences of the frequency of identified stressors and coping strategy responses between school groups.

Method

Subjects

All the subjects attended a laboratory school, housed in a state university in eastern Kentucky. These subjects were predominately caucasian and of

middle socioeconomic status. A total of 94 subjects in the primary grades of first and third grades were interviewed. Each primary group size was 47. The total of 207 middle school subjects were interviewed. These group sizes were as follows: 47 fifth graders, 57 sixth graders, 56 seventh graders, and 47 eighth graders.

Design and procedure

In order to collect stressor information, all subjects were asked the question: When you are at school, what worries or upsets you? The subjects in the primary grades (1 and 3) were individually interviewed. The interviewer asked the question orally and then recorded the subject's response in writing. The subjects in the middle school grades (5-8) were asked the same question but they were placed in a classroom group setting and were asked to write their own responses.

To collect coping strategy information, the subjects in the primary grades were individually interviewed. After responding to the stress question, each subject was asked the following coping strategy question: When these things worry you, how do you make yourself feel better? Each subject's response was recorded in writing by the interviewer. The subjects

in the middle grades were asked the same question but they were requested to write their own responses. The middle school subjects were placed in a group setting to get response information. Because the middle school subjects could read the questions well, they were given both interview questions in an oral and written manner.

Data scoring

After all the data were collected, all the responses were reviewed and classified into main categories of types. These types were identified and labeled from the information obtained in the review of literature plus the actual responses given by the subjects. Eight stressor types were established as follows:

1. schoolwork and achievement - homework, tests, grades, oral reports, written assignments.
2. peer relationships - peer pressure, boy/girl relationships, friendships.
3. relationships with teacher - like/dislike of teacher's personality, approach to instruction or classroom management techniques.
4. family events - parent relationships, child/parent relationships, sibling rivalry, family crises, extended families, and pets.
5. physical injury/loss - injuries from play ground, lunch lines, physical education classes, thefts, environmental disasters, and fights.
6. loss of personal space, comfort or time - logistical aspects of the school day and time from play activities.

7. discipline - punitive procedures administered by teachers or principals.
8. miscellaneous - statements not categorized in the other stressor types.

The following coping strategy types were adapted from Stone and Neal (1984). The categories and their definitions are as follows:

1. distraction - engaging in some activity to divert attention from the stressor.
2. redefinition - viewing the stressor from a different cognitive perspective.
3. direct action - pursuing a solution to eliminate or relieve the stressor.
4. catharsis - physical or verbal expressions of intense emotion.
5. acceptance - resigning to the notion that nothing can be done about the stressor.
6. social support - seeking physical and/or verbal comfort from family, peers, teachers.
7. relaxation - engaging in an activity with the acknowledged intent of relaxing.
8. miscellaneous - statements not categorized in the other coping categories.

A pilot study was conducted to determine the interrater reliability of the classification of responses into types. Sixty responses (inclusive of stressors and coping strategies) were randomly selected and classified into the established types by two different raters. The interrater reliability score was .99. This process was repeated with two other raters and a set of thirty randomly selected responses. The second inter-rater reliability score was .90. All responses were then compiled and placed into groups as follows: student identification number, grade, type of stressor (1-8), and type of coping strategy (1-8). It is noteworthy to the validity of the type

classification system of this study that only 12 out of 944 responses were classified as miscellaneous.

Results

Average frequencies of stressors and coping strategies were tested under the null hypothesis of equality. The test of this hypothesis was a likelihood ratio test based on the characterization of the data as Poisson distributed (Mendenhall & Scheaffer, (1981).

(insert Table 3 here)

Table 3 represents statistically significant differences in mean frequencies between the groups of primary grades (1 and 3) and middle school grades (5, 6, 7, and 8). Statistically significant differences were found between these groups in eight out of sixteen response areas. There was a significant gain in the mean frequencies of the two stress types of school work and achievement and peer relationships from the primary to the middle school grades. There was a significant decrease in the mean frequencies in the three stress types of physical injury/loss, loss of personal space, comfort and time, and discipline from the primary to the middle school grades. Three types of coping strategies were found to be statistically significantly different. There was a significant increase in the

reported coping strategies of distraction and catharsis with the middle school grades receiving the higher mean frequencies. For the coping strategy of direct action, a significantly lower mean frequency was found in the middle school grades.

Conclusions

The subjects in this study reported high frequency levels of stress with school work and achievement. Traditionally, guidance activities have focused on study habits and test taking as it relates to school work. It would seem that in addition to this approach, children should be given the opportunity to discuss their feelings about school work and how they can control their level of stress.

Peer relationships were reported to be high stressors and social support was identified to be a major coping strategy. Therefore, opportunities for children to interact in an formal setting would be an asset to guidance programing.

School life appeared to be a major concern for primary school children. Orientation programs and small group guidance discussions on adjusting to the mechanics of group living in a school situation is warranted.

Relaxation, catharsis, and redefinition were the lowest reported frequencies of coping strategies. Training in relaxation exercises, emotional expression, and cognitive restructuring are highly recommended.

The study of stress and coping in school is an area worthy of special attention. More importantly, children sharing their perception of stress and its management should be the starting point for classroom guidance programs.

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Table 2

Coping StrategiesHonig (1986)

ignoring unpleasant situations
 find compromiser
 accepting substitute satisfactions

Folkman (1984)

emotional focused
 problem focused

Stone and Neal (1984)

distraction
 situation redefinition
 direct action
 catharsis
 acceptance
 seeking social support
 relaxation
 religion

McDrae (1984) (12 of 25 listed coping strategies)

faith
 expression of feelings
 rational action
 positive thinking
 restraint
 drawing strength from adversity humor
 fatalism
 wishful thinking
 perseverance
 intellectual denial
 self adaptation
 humor

Table 3

Comparison of Average Frequencies of Stressors and Coping Strategies
between the Primary and Middle School Grade Groups

<u>Stressor</u>	<u>Primary (1 & 3)</u>	<u>Middle School (5 - 8)</u>
school work	.78	1.54*
peer relationships	.60	1.31*
teachers	.20	.24
family events	.18	.10
injury/loss	.47	.08*
personal space, conf., time	.50	.11*
discipline	.24	.08*
miscellaneous	.01	.06
<u>Coping Strategies</u>		
distraction	.83	1.14*
redefinition	.19	.19
direct action	.76	.52*
catharsis	.10	.21*
acceptance	.36	.31
social support	.55	.50
relaxation	.13	.07
misc.	.01	.02

*p .05